

St. Michael the Archangel  
Russian Orthodox Church  
Lake Avenue  
Cordova  
Alaska

HABS No. AK-58

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

HABS No. AK-58

Location: South side of Lake Avenue, Cordova, Alaska.

Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, the Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant: St. Michael the Archangel Russian Orthodox Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: A number of historic Russian Orthodox churches survive in Alaska, built by Native congregations in traditional forms. Despite changes to its vestibule and to the side walls of the nave, this small church retains its character. Unusual among Alaskan Russian Orthodox churches, the sanctuary is incorporated into the mass of the nave, not marked by a distinct form on the exterior.

#### PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

##### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1925.
2. Builder: The church was built by the congregation itself, assisted by people from Chenega. Forms for the concrete walls of the Federal Building were re-used as lumber for the church.
3. Original plans and construction: The church originally had the same rectangular, gable-roofed nave as it does now. A 1925 photograph shows a small vestibule with a gable roof at a flatter pitch than the church roof, with wood-shingled walls.<sup>1</sup>
6. Alterations and additions: By 1946, there was a new vestibule, larger, with novelty siding. Rising out of the roof of the vestibule was a small square belfry with round-arched openings. A small square cupola had been added to nave.<sup>2</sup>

Major repairs were made to the foundations and roof in 1966, and in the early 1970s major alterations were made, under the supervision of Fred Tiedeman. Both side walls were brought in about 2', changing the proportions considerably. The vestibule now extends across the front and has a shed roof.

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<sup>1</sup> Rose C. Arvidson, Cordova: The First 75 Years, A Photographic History (Cordova: Fathom Publishing Co., 1984), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Arvidson, 40.

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B. Historical Context:

1. Previous churches on the site: Neither Cordova nor Odiak, the old name for this part of Cordova, appears on an 1895 survey of Russian Orthodox churches and chapels. The first church was apparently built in 1899, and was known as St. Theodosius Chapel.<sup>3</sup> A 1905 survey by Frank Lascy, U.S. Deputy Surveyor, indicated an "old church" about one-third the size of the "new church," suggesting that a second church was built in 1905. The exact locations are uncertain, although the survey was labeled "Russian Greek Church Mission Reserve situate at Odiak."

In a letter home in 1916, a woman named Emma Wallace wrote about her arrival in Cordova: "The old deserted Russian church was the only church in Cordova 'Old Town' when I landed there [1907] and there was no minister at all."<sup>4</sup> This church may be the one pictured in a photograph labeled "Eyak" in the Anchorage Museum of History and Fine Arts; it shows a gable-roofed church, of much the same proportions as the present one, but with only two windows on a side, no vestibule, and a shingle covering.<sup>5</sup>

2. Origins: Many of the icons are from the Holy Transfiguration Russian Orthodox Church in the former village of Nuchek. John Klashinoff recalls that a priest told him they had been brought from Russia. The icons were moved first to Makaka Point, but in about 1914-16 they were moved to Cordova. Old papers in the Cordova church today are also from Nuchek, including an 1895 marriage certificate and a 1904 bill of sale.

Rev. Tikhon Lavreshev was the resident priest when the church was built; he was the last resident priest until Fr. Nicholas Kompkoff was assigned here ca. 1970. Kompkoff died in 1987 and there has not been a new one.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This plain building has little exterior ornament. The sanctuary is incorporated into the rectangular gable-roofed mass.
2. Condition of fabric: good.

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<sup>3</sup> Index to the Alaskan Russian Church Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Wallace to Anna, her sister, January 14, 1916, Betty Farni Collection, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

<sup>5</sup> Photograph B62.1.182, Anchorage Museum of History and Fine Arts.

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B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building measures approximately 23' x 44'.
2. Foundations: The foundations are concealed by metal-roofed bulkheads.
3. Walls: The west gable end has horizontal novelty siding, the side walls have vertical novelty siding, and the east end has wood shingles. The vestibule is clad in wide clapboards. The walls are painted white with blue trim.

The side walls have been brought in about 2'. On the south wall, the gable end extends past the side wall, and a new soffit has been placed on the underside of the roof that was originally on the interior. On the north wall, the gable end has been cut off, giving the front of the building a slightly asymmetrical appearance.

4. Structural system, framing: light wood frame.
5. Chimneys: There is a stovepipe on the north side of the nave.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The double door into the vestibule has hollow-core doors set in plain surrounds.
  - b. Windows and shutters: The windows have six-over-six-light double-hung sash and are set in plain surrounds. The windows on the east end have crudely paneled shutters.
7. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: The nave has a steeply pitched gable roof, and the vestibule a shed roof; both are covered with corrugated metal.
  - b. Cornice, eaves: There is a plain board cornice on the gable ends, and exposed rafter ends on the sides.
  - c. Cupola: There is a small square cupola at the front end of the nave. It has vents on the sides and a pyramidal roof. Its walls and roof are covered with metal.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Each element of the interior -- the vestibule, nave, and sanctuary -- is an open space. Areas have been curtained off on either side of the vestibule for storage.

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2. Flooring: Wall-to-wall carpeting.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls have new panelling of vertical boards, with a darker wainscot and lighter above. The ceiling, which has sloped sides, is finished with acoustic tile.
4. Doorways and doors: The doors between the vestibule and the nave are hollow core.
5. Decorative features: The iconostas across the east end of the nave is constructed of new paneling, with some very old icons.
6. Mechanical equipment: There is fluorescent lighting and an oil-fired furnace in the nave.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church faces west, with its sanctuary in the east end. Located between Lake Eyak and the harbor, the church is on a gravel road secluded by large trees. There is a trailer park just to the west.
2. Outbuildings: A house down the road about 50 yards looks much like the church, only smaller, and may have had some relation. It has a front gable roof with rafter ends exposed on the sides and is clad with clapboards.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

Early photographs of the present church are found in Rose C. Arvidson, Cordova: The First 75 Years, A Photographic History (Cordova: Fathom Publishing Co., 1984), p. 40.

Photograph of previous church, B62.1.182, Anchorage Museum of History and Fine Arts.

A plat map found in the church is titled "Russian Greek Church Mission Reserve situate at Odiak" and is signed by Frank Lascy, U.S. Deputy Surveyor, September 24, 1905, and by the U.S. Surveyor General for Alaska, April 2, 1908.

B. Interviews: John Klashinoff, taped interview by Lavon Branshaw, April 1987.

C. Bibliography:

Kompkoff, Rev. Nicholas. "A Brief History of Saint Michael the Archangel Orthodox Church of Cordova, Alaska." typescript, n.d. [ca. 1972]. He notes that his informants

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were John Klashinoff, Hollis Hendricks, and Bill Barnes.

Nielsen, Nicki J. From Fish and Copper: Cordova's Heritage and Buildings. Cordova Historical Society, 1984.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of St. Michael the Archangel Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska, and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during summer 1989 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Jet Lowe, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

ADDENDUM TO  
ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
Lake Avenue  
Cordova-~~McCarthy~~  
Valdez-Cordova  
Alaska

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